

ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELD WORK IN THE USSR

The first Ethnographical Society in Russia was founded around 1845, under the auspices of the Imperial Society of Geography, followed by the publication of a journal, Etnograficheskoe Obosrenie. Its character and aims were similar to those of the Royal Anthropological Institute, as described by Edmund Leach:

The Institute in its origins was a typical 19th c. learned society. Anthropology was not, as it is now, a 'subject' studied by undergraduates at universities with an appropriate cadre of professional and academic staff; it was a leisure-time pursuit for a small number of enthusiastic gentlemen amateurs. Most of them were possessed with substantial private means, and with one or two notable exceptions, they all rode hobby horses of the greatest eccentricity (Leach 1974).

The St. Petersburg anthropologists were not, on the whole, eccentrics, but rather an exceptionally liberal-minded group of people. This was recognized by a Soviet hard-liner, whose attitude nevertheless permitted the claim that:

Russian ethnography of the 19th and (early) 20th centuries was never of an officious character, never offered its services to tsarism. The Russian ethnographic bodies of that period had an advanced social nature (Tolstoy 1946).

The principle concern was to study the social life of various peoples coming under the umbrella of the Tsarist empire. Although speculative interest in man's prehistoric origins was not excessive, anthropologists attempted to place each social phenomenon at a stage along a scale of unilineal development, as was the general practice of social scientists at the time. A few overseas expeditions were made by Russians of the 19th century, the most outstanding figure being Miklukho-Maclay, a Russian Scotsman, who travelled to Oceania and lived there for seven years. He carried out some of the best fieldwork done in his time (Lienhardt 1964). Unfortunately the precedent set by Miklukho-Maclay has been neglected, and long-term expeditions abroad have been abandoned; his revered name, however, has been given to the central Ethnographic Institute of the USSR.

The Kunst Kamera, established under Peter the Great, to this day houses an impressive collection of exotic objects. It is administered and is adjacent to the present-day Leningrad Branch of the Institute of Ethnography. Throughout the Soviet Union there is a network of local folk-art museums, many of them employing the services of trained ethnographers.

The prominent Russian ethnographers of the late 19th and early 20th century, Bogoraz-Tan, Shternberg, Maynov and others did their field-work in Siberia when exiled there as political dissidents by the Tsarist regime. As outcasts, their social standing was lower than that of the natives themselves; Academician

Olderogge, the present director of the Leningrad Institute of Ethnography, has pointed out to me that this brought about different social relationships with the natives and therefore a different quality of fieldwork than that done by Americans among Indians on reservations or by the British anthropologists in Colonial territories. I agree with him: they had no European goods to offer, they could not mediate in any way between the indigenous population and those in authority, and often had to depend entirely on the mercy of the former for subsistence, shelter and medical care for indefinite periods, perhaps for the rest of their lives. It would take a careful analysis, though, to see how the differences in fieldwork results and writings were direct manifestations of the contrasting position of the British and the Russian exiled anthropologists.¹

I would like to suggest that the close links with Museum work on the one hand and the respectable anti-Tsarist history of several pre-Revolutionary anthropologists on the other hand have both been influential factors in allowing Anthropology (Etnografia) to have had a less checkered, more smooth and continuous course as a separate discipline than any other social science in the Soviet Union. Admittedly, Etnografia was juggled around from faculty to faculty and some ethnographers lost their lives in the purges (notably Zinoviev's secretary)², but the career of anthropology cannot be compared with, for example, that of Sociology. Sociology as a separate discipline was disallowed and absorbed into the un-specialised discipline of Historical Materialism until the 1960's (Weinberg 1974), whereas a separate Department of Ethnography under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences and University sub-departments of Ethnography in the Faculty of History has been recognised and has continued to exist throughout the Soviet period.

After the Revolution, the Leningrad Institute of Ethnography came under the direction of the Academy of Sciences in 1925. In World War II most of the seventy members of the Leningrad Institute were tragically killed, and the main branch was moved to Moscow.

Shortly before Lenin's death, and in accordance with the principles of the nationalities policy to be established in the Soviet Union, a Research Unit for the study of the Far North (Siberia) was set up to gather information on the many peoples inhabiting the area. Similarly, a commission on Central Asia, in which professional ethnographers participated, was set up for the re-organization of the National republics. Ethnographic research was therefore seen as 'useful'.

Most of this work was carried out by Russian scholars. Simultaneously, however, Institutes of Education using native languages were set up along with the establishment of Soviet power in areas such as central Asia, and so local ethnographers have been trained continuously, partly by Russians and partly by other local scholars. In some other parts of the Soviet Union the situation was different. In the Caucasus, for example, Georgia and Armenia have a culture and a literary tradition much older than that of Russia. They managed to survive the constant invasions of Turks, Mongols and Persians, and local erudition had never been entirely quelled by the anti-nationalist policy of the Tsarist regime. An ethnographical society was founded in Georgia in the second half of

the 19th century and Caucasian scholars, following the absorption of these areas into the Soviet Union, quickly redeveloped their schools of ethnography, writing to this day works unexcelled by foreign and particularly western scholarship. The Ukraine is a similar case where mainly indigenous schools of ethnography were created. When the Baltic states - where the ethnographic tradition had been predominantly German - became part of the Soviet Union, Russian scholars were sent there to form cadres trained in Marxism. Most indigenous Baltic ethnographers now write mainly on material culture, and with a few exceptions - an outstanding example being Vilve Kalits - social studies have been carried out by Russian visitors, among whom Professor L. Terentyeva is prominent. A dedicated specialist of Baltic culture, she now heads the Baltic section in the Moscow Institute of Ethnography.

Most of the ethnographic publications in the outlying Union republics have been in the local languages and the scholars' dialogues have been mainly carried out among themselves. By and large, they study their own societies, and their knowledge is highly specialised. To the outsider, who has mastered neither the background knowledge nor the language, the issues they discuss occasionally seem somewhat obscure, but this is not to imply any weakness on the part of the indigenous ethnographers.

Frequently, but certainly not always, local ethnographers do fieldwork in the rural area they themselves originally come from. They live in the capital and are members of the Academy of Sciences Institutes or universities, but go on visits to the villages, sometimes just in the summer, sometimes for a week or so in the winter. The annual, all-Union conference of Ethnographers takes place in a different Soviet city each year, but it is organized from Moscow, and the main journal, Sovyetskaya Etnografia, is published in Moscow, in Russian with short English summaries. A majority of articles and book reviews are by members of the Institute of the main USSR Academy of Sciences based in Moscow and Leningrad. These authors are by far the best known in the West. Works published in the outlying republics are usually difficult to obtain - not only for Western scholars but for Soviets as well, outside the given republic.

It is significant that, during the reorganization of the sciences in the early Soviet period, the study of Ethnography was moved from the Geographical Departments to those of History. The historical principle is the main analytical device used in all Soviet anthropology today.

It is difficult to do justice to the complexity and length of the debates on the nature of history and its role in the social sciences, which have become increasingly sophisticated by comparison with the neo-evolutionism of the immediate postwar period. Ernest Gellner in his enlightening article 'The Soviet and the Savage' (Gellner 1975), correctly demonstrated this most striking difference between Western anthropologists and their Soviet colleagues.

Gellner sees Western anthropology, in the main, as having a functionalist-static vision of man and society which he contrasts

with the Soviet Evolutionist-historical approach. From British studies, he says, we still have the impression that each examined society merely trails its own past behind it as a comet trails its tail; the interest of the tail is a function of the interest in a particular comet, not the other way round. He writes:

It is here that the contrast with the instinctive thought-style of a Soviet anthropologist is most marked. One might say that for the Soviet scholar the interest of a comet, generally speaking, is a function of the interest of its tail, and that all such tails fuse, at least in principle, in an all-embracing history of mankind (Gellner 1975).

In my view, the historicism of the Soviet approach has deeper roots than can be simply traced to the adoption of Marxism in 1917. Remembering that what can be called formal anthropology began in Russia and some other parts of what is now the Soviet Union at about the same time as in Britain, the transition to Marxism took place before anthropologists anywhere had rejected the evolutionary, historical approach to the study of human society. Frazer and Westermarck, busily tracing the development of human history and finding explanations of contemporary social phenomena through interpretations of the past, were still thriving around 1917. With the Revolution and the commitment to Marxist-Leninist interpretive theory, Russian ethnographers were cut off from Malinowskian and other later rejections of the historicist approach. They have never known anything else, and I believe that their attitude to History, their trust in retrospective reconstruction, are produced not only by Marxist piety, but by a deeply rooted, uninterrupted cultural tradition (Dragadze 1975).

Historical and anthropological enquiry are more closely associated in the Soviet Union than in the West, as is shown in the daily concerns of fieldwork. I can best illustrate this through a conversation I once had with a Russian anthropologist studying shaman seances among the Turkmen. He told me that when he returned to a Turkmen village he had lived in previously he brought 100 wooden spoons from Moscow as gifts. His host, the local schoolmaster, spent three days dividing and redividing the spoons into groups, according, it was explained, to the importance in the village of each family. He would allocate, for example, seven spoons for one family, only three for another, then change his mind and allocate to them six and four spoons respectively. I said to the anthropologist that this event could be considered a fascinating opportunity to learn about prestige ranking and social relations in the village. He replied, however, that this was not his concern. He had spent the three days waiting anxiously because he only hoped the distribution would be acceptable to the villagers so that the elders would let him attend their seances; he had detected Indo-European elements in the rites and only through repeated observation would he be able to judge whether or not there were Indo-European influences in early Turkmen religion.

Soviet anthropologists feel duty bound to record all traditions and local customs before they die out. Information gathered from old people is treasured as the key to understanding social history in the past, the reconstruction of which is often seen to be their central task.

The nature of etnografia³ is the subject of recent heated debate. Although discussion takes place within a framework acceptable to the official ideologists, it is nevertheless intense and lively.

Although there is a good degree of consensus among the senior generation of anthropologists both in Russia and the other republics, that etnografia is a branch of history, there has been recently a marked shift of emphasis in the Moscow Institute. S. P. Tolstov, in 1946 (as director of the Moscow Institute of Ethnography from which he launched Etnografia in the post-war period) wrote that:

Etnografia is a branch of history, which researches the cultural and customary particularities of different peoples of the world in their historical development, which studies the problems of origin and cultural-historical relations between these peoples and which establishes the history of their settlements and movements (Tolstov 1946).

In the 1968 textbook for undergraduates in etnografia, Professor S. A. Tokarev, then head of department at Moscow University, succinctly defined the subject as: 'A historical science, studying peoples and their way of life and culture' (Tokarev 1968). The most recent student textbook, however, written by the Leningrad University Head of Department, Professor R. Its, introduced the subject as follows:

Etnografia is the historical science of the origins and ethnic history of peoples, and of the formation of specific particularities of their culture and way of life as constituting parts of world civilization (Its 1974).

Here we can feel the influence of a new trend in defining the discipline, in which the experience of fieldwork has played a significant role. Some scholars have felt that if ethnographic studies are to be devoted to the study of quaint customs and local traditions - which, as we will see, is the style of the purists - then etnografia, like the elderly informants from whom data is gathered, will die a rapid death. With this in mind, J. Bromley (whose English ancestor came to Russia with Napoleon), director of the Moscow Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, suggested that our discipline should become the study of 'ethnoses' (Dragadze 1978 and 1979). The inhabitants of present-day USSR are members of various 'ethnoses', each with ethnic-specific characteristics which are transformed by Soviet power and the onset of modernity but which nevertheless continue to exist.⁴ These 'ethnoses' have their origin in pre-capitalist times and so they should be studied in a historical perspective, with special attention being paid to the problems of ethnogenesis. But Bromley sees a place for Ethnography in the study of contemporary life for its own sake, and not, like most Soviet anthropologists, to seek knowledge about societies in pre-Revolutionary times (Bromley 1973).

These two styles of thought and the cluster of areas of interest which surround them - history and ethnicity - are expressed directly in the two main types of fieldwork done in the USSR.

I. Traditional Anthropology

G. Chitaia, in the main Soviet journal of anthropology, published an article on 'The principles and methods of ethnographic field-work' (1957), where he elaborated the 'complex-intensive method'. Whether you study the shape of a plough or a ceremony of marriage, you should endeavour to study it in all its inexhaustible aspects. In fact, traditional Soviet fieldwork can be characterised by a few main features, from which individual work varies to different degrees:

1. Fieldwork is usually done by more than one person. Typical is the 'complex expedition' formed of a group of anthropologists, one studying religion, the other indigenous agricultural techniques, the third marriage customs and so forth. Often other experts participate - perhaps an architect and a botanist. Some expeditions are organized in conjunction with an archaeology project, with shared facilities. Anthropology group expeditions have a leader, and on the occasions when they are not being entertained by the local population, the members may report on their day's work during and after a communal evening meal. There are, however, many variations on this pattern of fieldwork.

2. For most areas of interest to the social anthropologist (in the usual 'British' sense) the fieldworkers compile data based on what informants tell them. The ear, not the eye, is their tool. This is not to say that anthropologists do not place tremendous value on being eye-witnesses at ceremonies and the like, but since overriding interest is so often placed in past history, an anthropologist may write a monograph on phenomena he or she has never seen. Many monographs give the name, age and village of informants from whom a particular piece of knowledge was obtained. A fieldworker will visit as many villages and speak to as many informants as possible in a region since it is thought that the quantity of sources of information in itself adds substance to the results obtained.

3. On the whole, there is a 'fieldwork season', namely the summer months. The Institutes and Departments of Anthropology organize and subsidize expeditions for students and staff alike, and sanctions can be brought to bear on scholars not involved in heavy administration who neglect the season.

In our evaluation of Soviet fieldwork, a straightforward appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the seasonal period (three months or less is average) is useful. Soviet interests and methods being what they are, the lengthy periods of fieldwork that we consider necessary would not have the same status or importance for our Soviet colleagues. On the other hand the most striking advantage, to my mind, of their tradition is that fieldwork never stops. I have accompanied one septagenarian and one octagenarian anthropologist on fieldwork expeditions in the summer - expeditions that are so much part of their lives that they would meet any suggestion of missing a season with suspicion.

I sometimes imagine that such fieldwork expeditions must be reminiscent of the Torres Straights expedition. An enthusiastic group of various specialists sets out, suitably equipped, to study all things curious, the anthropologists among them carrying many notebooks to record oral information from the natives, and trying

to memorize a set of questions for interpreters to ask them. The analogy, however, is misleading. Soviet anthropologists would not expect to meet naked savages in plumed headresses, for example, in a country where literacy is almost universal. Local party officials, who often play host to the expedition on arrival, will have studied Russian and will display their knowledge of the ubiquitous 'party universe of discourse'. Although Russian anthropologists do not hesitate as we would to work through interpreters, there are several centres of learning where the languages of the Soviet Union can be thoroughly studied.

The knowledge that local officials might receive any material that is published about their district makes anthropologists operate under many of the constraints that we experience when doing fieldwork in Western Europe and North America (cf. A. Sutherland 1975). It would be an oversimplification, however, to attribute to problems of informants' confidentiality the lack of field studies comparable to those familiar to us in 'the West'. For example, our typical aim is to come slowly to a recognition of how people in a given culture view their lives, or gingerly to penetrate the maze of strategies and skillsthrough which they establish their places in their social world - areas of knowledge which require long periods of fieldwork and the establishment of intense social relations with members of the community. These aims are not relinquished as an impossible dream in the USSR, either because of their country's political system or because of the brevity of fieldwork periods. Rather, they do not figure as prominently in the pantheon of aspirations as they do in ours; the study of patron-client relations in a contemporary village, for example, simply cannot be encompassed within their definition of anthropology.

Having established camp and co-ordinated their intended activities through the expedition leader, they set off from house to house, seeking out the elderly of whom to ask questions. It may be that one of them is anxious to record legends and myths or to hear accounts of weddings, festivals and the like. It will be taken for granted that quaint customs and beliefs are typical of pre-Revolutionary times, and they will therefore look for elderly eyewitnesses of that period. It is a convention, when reporting, to refer to 'olden times' or 'the past' - without precise dates - in descriptions of customs and beliefs which might have been encountered during fieldwork done in the present. This, I am told, protects the informants. Yet one meets with an ambiguity, especially among local ethnographers studying their own people, who on the one hand are keen on demonstrating the liveliness and uniqueness of their people's traditions but who on the other hand would like them to be seen as 'progressive' rather than 'backward' citizens of the USSR. Anthropologists study 'traditions' when doing fieldwork, and coupling this with the use of documentary evidence (they are well trained, on the whole, in archive work) they can work on historical reconstruction, on the history of ethnic groups, or on the history of their particular ethnic features. Studies of contemporary society however usually include favourable comparisons of the present with past times.

In 1970, the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences in Moscow began publishing a series on annual results of fieldwork expeditions (Basilov et al. eds. 1971). We can take a

selection of the 21 reports: 'Ornithomorphic designs in the ornamental headdresses in Yaroslavl-Kostroma' (Middle Russia); 'Women's clothing in Russian village settlements in Altai at the end of the 19th century and beginning of 20th century'; 'A study of mountain irrigation in South Tadjikistan and the Western Pamirs'; 'Data on herding among the people of South Tadjikistan and the Western Pamirs'; 'On survivals of communal land use in the first quarter of the 20th century in Tashkent oases'; 'The study of the contemporary family among rural Armenians in Karabakh'; 'Ingush tales of ethnogenesis'; 'Survivals of sorcery among the Ingush'; 'The study of family customs among the Mordvians' and so forth. For 1970, the Institute members were given themes to work on by the directorate, for example 'The basic paths of development of the economy, culture and customs among the minority peoples of the North' (i.e. Siberia). So V. Tugolukov worked among the Evenks and Yukagirs in five districts; work was done among the Khants (the expedition leader was V. Vasiliev); A. Smolyak worked on the Nanai and Ulchi peoples, and so forth. Under the same rubric of studying paths of development, L. Monogarova led an expedition to the Tadjik Pamirs. Others went on expeditions to study aspects of ethnogenesis and ethnic history (the transition from one to the other is believed to take place when the given people become aware of themselves as a distinct ethnic group (see Dragadze 1978 and 1979)) in other parts of Central Asia. Others studied patterns of early settlement in the Northern Caucasus as well as in Central Asia, and traditional dwellings (or relics thereof) were studied in thirty two settlements in Daghestan. As a contribution to the theme 'History of religion and atheism' some members of the Ethnography Institute studied shamanism in various parts of the USSR.

There is no reference in this Moscow publication to fieldwork done outside the USSR in 1970, although occasionally anthropologists are allowed to join scientific research ships that are primarily used by oceanographers but which sometimes call in at various ports. The Leningrad branch of the Institute, which has more members studying foreign peoples than in Moscow, has occasionally been able to send anthropologists on such cruises to the Pacific Ocean. A few Moscow anthropologists, such as Kryukov, have done a month or so of visiting to Vietnam and other countries of South-East Asia. Their publications on peoples outside the USSR often, however, show considerable scholarship, and their mastery of documentary sources, as well as close readings of monographs by Western anthropologists, compensate generously for their almost total lack of fieldwork experience in these countries. It is, I think, their particular interests and their definition of the subject, rather than the difficulties of international political relations, which explain the neglect of fieldwork abroad.

II. Ethnosociology

This hybrid term has been created by Soviet scholars to describe an area of study which they claim combines the specialist concerns of those interested in 'ethnos' theory and those wanting to use 'sociological methods'. The latter basically means using mass questionnaires, a technique emphasised since the recent revival of Sociology. If anthropology is to survive as a discipline, it must study contemporary phenomena - so the argument goes - despite the persistence, among some anthropologists, of the traditional approach. With the unique training anthropologists have in studying traditions and

ethnic history, they can make a useful contribution both to social science and to the welfare of their country by studying ethnic processes, and the differences in attitudes to national culture among the peoples of the USSR who, we must remember, share the same political and economic system. With the politics of nationalism being as delicate as it is, great tact and skill must be employed in these studies, and the main researcher in ethnosociology, Y. V. Arutunyan, has been careful to limit his scope of study without falling into either dishonesty or sterility. Fieldwork consists of sending out teams to different republics and asking such questions as 'what would be your reaction to your daughter marrying a Russian?' This is one of about 150 questions in their standard set. Another issue studied, by examining internal passport records, is the preference children show in choosing between their mother's and father's nationality, when these are different. Attention is also paid to questions of religious preference, to differences in attitudes to family size, and to a host of other ethnic-specific particularities - to use the Soviet term. Discussion also concerns the methodology necessary to go through every street in a given urban district or set of villages. Interpreters are used, often local university students or Communist Youth cadres, and when the informants' answers have been read and coded, statisticians and computer programmers take over. Ethnosociologists insist that they are nevertheless anthropologists and not sociologists in the strict sense, because their field of interest - their object of study, in dialectical terminology - is ethnic specificity, the field of anthropology. They claim that only their methods of fieldwork differ from those habitually used by anthropologists.

III. Fieldwork for Foreign Anthropologists

By now it must be clear that the training we are given in the West and the expectations we have when doing fieldwork are not the same as in the USSR. Foreigners are forbidden to travel without restriction in the USSR, which is in itself a notorious problem in international co-operation. Even if we could set this difficulty aside, however, we would find it difficult in anthropology institutes and university departments there to assert the necessity that we be allowed to do fieldwork of eighteen months' duration in a single rural community. They themselves go to the field for a maximum of three months at a time, and are perfectly satisfied with this arrangement; the arguments we would use, from Malinowski onwards, would seem irrelevant to them.

I myself had difficulty in convincing my local supervisor, when I was a guest of Tbilisi State University (Georgian SSR) that I would not be considered a bona fide anthropologist when I returned to England unless I were allowed to settle and actually take part in the life of a village for a considerable time. It was only because I then stayed three years in the USSR, and also because he is a flexible man, that I was able to do what we could consider here to be a 'respectable' period of fieldwork. Most other anthropologists have not been so fortunate and have only been allowed considerably shorter periods of fieldwork. Their visits to Leningrad or Moscow on Anglo-Soviet exchange schemes are usually never longer than a year, with only short visits to the rural areas during their stay. Either we must decide to study areas of social anthropology which do not require lengthy fieldwork, or else we

must finally persuade the Soviet authorities to be more tolerant of our own quirks and traditions of fieldwork, which they find somewhat bizarre. Otherwise we will be deprived of the opportunity of studying in the USSR some of the most fascinating peoples in the world.

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NOTES

1. A discussion of this Russian ethnographic experience could have been fruitful for Talal Asad's examination of anthropology and colonialism (Asad ed. 1973).
2. His being an anthropologist had, of course, nothing to do with the reasons for his death.
3. Etnografia in Russia does not easily translate into the British understanding of 'ethnography' or 'social anthropology', although I translate it with the second term whenever possible.
4. Elsewhere (Dragadze 1979), I have likened this idea to Ardener's early concept of 'templates' (Ardener 1970).

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